

Vernacular Buildings of Cumbria

June Hill, chairman of the Cumbria Vernacular Buildings Group, spoke to a meeting of the Appleby Archaeological Society on March 14th. She started by explaining that the Vernacular Building Group (partnered with the Heritage Action Group), is not a preservation society but instead one that studies surviving vernacular buildings and records examples of local building traditions in Cumbria. One of the first records of this tradition was published in 1970 by R.W.Brunskill entitled "Illustrated Handbook of Vernacular Architecture" covering local building methods throughout Britain. This proved so popular, he followed with "Vernacular History of the Lake Counties" published in 1974, recording building traditions peculiar to the former counties of Cumberland and Westmorland.

Examples of simple buildings used by medieval peasants have not survived in Cumbria, but a period of great rebuilding took place in Cumberland & Westmorland in the 16th century when housing construction for poorer people was much improved. In the Lake Counties, locally available stone and slate were used for building, Their durability leaves evidence of transhumance, the practice favoured by early Cumbrian farmers of tending flocks high in the fells during summer before returning to the valley in winter.

A new class of farmer emerged during the Middle Ages - Yeoman farmers who owned their own land and rebuilt previously rented farmhouses. A great deal of information about these building can be found in wills and inventories, often enough to deduce the owners status. By the middle of the 17th century almost eighty percent of Westmorland households had at least one fireplace against a gable wall. A funnel shaped hood lined with lime plaster collected the smoke and a "bacon box" was often provided in the room above where beef and bacon could be cured. A stout piece of wood called a rannel-balk was inserted crosswise in the chimney from which a strong hook, called a ratten-crook, was suspended and used to hang large iron pots over cooking fires. The cooking area was lit by a small fire-window in the front wall and the warmest area in the cottage was created by a partition called a "heck" on the opposite side of the fire. The upper floor of earlier small houses was more akin to a loft since a fixed stepladder was the only means of access until stone spiral stairs were introduced. These can often be seen from outside the property as a semi-circular feature on the rear wall.

In Georgian times the building of "polite" double-pile houses took over from the vernacular and provided the basic layout for the Victorian houses that were to follow.

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